

## **“Following in the Footsteps of Love and Life”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

11-12-17 Consecration Sunday

Based upon Ruth 1:6-18; John 6:56-63; 66-69

When I was in middle school, my friends and I spent most of our free-time swooning over T.V. stars. The object of my adoration was John Schneider, the blond-haired, blue-eyed star from *The Dukes of Hazard*, which was hugely popular show back then. My friend’s dream man was Eric Estrada, the police officer with the brilliant smile on the T.V. show *CHIPS*. As middle school girls often do, we spent hours watching our idols on the small screen, and reading all about them in teen magazines. We joined their fan clubs and wrote them letters. We cut out thousands of pictures of them so that we could plaster our rooms with their images. (Actually, since I had nice wall paper in my bedroom, I covered the hallway outside of my bedroom with pictures, much to my older sister’s horror, since that hallway led to her room too.) My greatest act of devotion was to walk with my best friend ten kilometers in the pouring rain for a March of Dimes fundraiser, just for the privilege of getting to shake Schneider’s hand at the end, (while looking like a wet dishrag of course.) But although I managed to go the distance then for my crush, the crush did not in the long run. Celebrity crushes never last long because they aren’t really grounded in reality. Not long after that walk, my friend and I redecorated our hearts and walls with images of Robert Redford and Paul Newman instead, and now, well, my whole *Dukes of Hazzard* phase is just an embarrassing chapter from my childhood. John Schneider may be a very nice man for all I know, but I wouldn’t walk miles in the rain for him even if he personally requested that I do so.

I am not sorry that I went through that phase; childhood crushes are part of growing up. But as we see in today’s lessons, when we grow up and still mistake a crush on Jesus for a steadfast loving commitment to Jesus, then both we and the world end up missing out. After Jesus was able to feed 5,000 hungry people with the loaves and fish miracle I spoke about last week, many people in the crowd had a crush on Christ. He was a charismatic, loving rabbi who could make a satisfying meal out of a few bread crumbs without using a magic wand or breaking a sweat. For a leader-starved, as well as bread-starved people, that was pretty hard to resist. But many in the crowds at that early stage of Jesus’ ministry were not really following Jesus because they loved his teachings, nor did they worship him because they thought he was the Messiah, the son of God. They followed him around Galilee because they wanted more bread, and they worshiped him as a miracle worker.

So when Jesus started talking to them as if he were God, when he started talking about himself being the “bread of heaven,” a lot of his screaming fans felt their adoration quickly wane. The whole bread-of-heaven thing sounded kind of blasphemous, and the eat-the-flesh-and-drink-the-blood talk was creepy. So according to *John*, many abandoned Jesus that day. They had loved him when they thought he was the equivalent of a holy vending machine who would meet their needs. But they were not prepared to commit to a movement which necessitated that they change their understandings of God and the world, and rearrange their lives and priorities in a radical way. It was one thing to follow him into the countryside for a snack, but it was another thing altogether to have to “die to self” and follow him to a cross.

Now let's compare their fickle-fan love to the love we see in the story of Ruth today. Although Ruth's words are most often quoted these days out of context by brides and grooms in weddings, they were not originally words prompted by a romantic relationship at all. When she spoke them, Ruth was talking to her mother-in-law, Naomi. She, her husband, and her sons had fled Bethlehem during a famine and settled in the neighboring country of Moab. Once there, the sons had fallen in love and gotten married to two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. But then tragedy struck, and all of the men in the story died. This left all of the women in a precarious position. There's a reason God spoke so much in the Bible about the need to care for widows and orphans; legally widows had no real way to take care of themselves. They weren't allowed to keep their husband's property, or to work. If they couldn't find family members to marry them or take them in, then their lives were truly in jeopardy. So Naomi, the matriarch, said to her daughters-in-law, "I'm going back to my family in Judah. You go back to your families." Reluctantly, Orpah, agreed with the plan. But Ruth wouldn't hear of it. Regardless of how precarious their situation was, and how difficult the road ahead was going to be, Ruth loved Naomi and considered her to be her family. So instead of leaving her as commanded, she clung tighter to Naomi, speaking those memorable words: "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God."

The *Book of Ruth* holds many valuable lessons. It teaches that God loves non-believers as much as believers and that God is with us in suffering. It teaches us about the ancestry of both David and Christ. But perhaps the most important lesson in *Ruth* for people of faith is about a kind of love which is very different from crush love, the kind called "*hesed*." *Hesed* is one of those Hebrew words which is impossible to translate fully into English with a single word. It means love, but not in a romantic sense, in the selfless, covenant-keeping sense—a love grounded in steadfast loyalty and commitment to God and God's way. *Hesed* also means kindness, but not in the simple, "do an act of kindness every day" way. *Hesed*'s kindness is one part mercy and another part justice, that is, kindness in terms of helping others in trouble. When *hesed* is used to describe how God feels about humanity in the Bible, it is usually translated "steadfast love" because God is steadfastly faithful to us whether we are faithful in return or not. When *hesed* is used to describe how humans feel, it is usually translated "loving kindness," because human beings are not as steadfast in our loyalty and love as God is. But there really isn't supposed to be a difference. We are called to love God and our neighbors with a *hesed* kind of love because that is how God loves us. We are called to love in a way which is selfless, steadfast, and helpful to others in need.

The *Book of Ruth* is filled to overflowing with *hesed*. Ruth loves Naomi with it, sticking with her and taking care of her to the point of going to a foreign land and embracing a foreign religion. Naomi then loves Ruth with it, taking care of her by teaching her what she needs to do in Israeli culture in order to snag a man who will take care of her. Boaz, who becomes Ruth's husband, is full of *hesed* too, going out of the way to ensure that Ruth is taken care of when the closer male relative, who should have married her, did not step up. Basically each of the main characters in the story, out of love, makes choices to care for the well-being of others. Thus in addition to giving us a powerful example of the kind of community living that God calls for in Christ, *Ruth* also shows us how God's *hesed* both generates and works through human *hesed*. As

biblical scholar Katherine Doob Sakenfeld explained it, God is mentioned repeatedly in *Ruth*, but does not have a speaking role. Instead, “God is at work in the everyday actions of faithful people seeking to manifest divine loyalty in their loyal interactions with those around them.”<sup>1</sup>

I love that description of hesed because it shows how much hesed and true faithfulness, as opposed to fandom, go together. The great Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr defined faith as equal parts trust and fidelity born from love. Trust is the passive aspect of faith. We love God, so we put our confidence in God and God’s ways. Loyalty is the active aspect. It makes God “the center for which we live and labor.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, not all Christians today have this kind of faith. There are many who come to church seeking more to be helped than to help, more to be glorified themselves than to glorify God. And there are others who think faith is simply about accepting certain doctrines. But in the Bible faith is about loving God so much that both your mind and heart trust that God will be with you, and that God’s way is right, even if your circumstances are challenging or Jesus’ teachings are tough. In the Bible, faith is about loving God with such fidelity that you are willing to say, “Where you go I go, and where you lodge I lodge. And your people will be my people.” Peter demonstrated this kind of faith after Jesus’ bread-loving groupies had fled. “Lord to whom can we go? You have the words to eternal life,” and Ruth illustrated this kind of faith when she clung both to Naomi, and Naomi’s God Yahweh.

Today, on Consecration Sunday, we are invited to follow their example. We are here to say to God, “God, I love you, not in a teenage crush sort of way that isn’t grounded in reality, and not in a self-serving kind of way which reduces you to a vending machine for my pleasure, but in a hesed-way. I trust you and am prepared to be loyal to you even when your teachings are hard or others fall away. I will go where you go, and I recognize that your people are my people.” Today we will say this by pledging our resources for God’s service through the church, and by prayerfully offering God our time and our talents as well. If you are visiting today, I don’t want you to feel put on the spot to make a financial commitment to the church, although we would certainly gratefully receive it. But I do hope that everyone here will make a commitment of the heart to God today. Niebuhr said that to say you believe in Christ is to take an oath of allegiance. So let us all pledge our hearts and our hands, not just our money. Let us commit ourselves to live in a way that God’s steadfast love of humanity is visible through the way that we are loyal and loving in our interactions with each other. Let us recommit ourselves to helping each other and to following wherever Jesus leads.

There’s a funny old Jewish proverb which says, “Three things can’t be hidden: coughing, poverty, and love.”<sup>3</sup> I don’t know if that’s still true these days now that we have narcotic cough suppressants and credit cards to hide our debt. But I do know that it is impossible to hide hesed. God’s steadfast love of humanity is visible everywhere you look, but above all in Jesus Christ. Today and every day, may God’s hesed also be visible in us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob, *Ruth*, INTERPRETATION: A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR TEACHING AND PREACHING, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr, H. Richard, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Rosten’s Treasury of Jewish Quotations (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972), 341.